

Evansville Courier

Editorial: Crucial Decision (I-69)

The Issue: I-69 faces uncertain fate in Senate committee. Our View: Don't gamble away this opportunity.

February 16, 2006

Today's highway hearing before the Indiana Senate Appropriations Committee could set the stage for a crucial decision on the future of an Interstate 69 extension between Evansville and Indianapolis.

The committee will take public testimony today on Gov. Mitch Daniels' highway legislation package, which includes language that would allow for a private-public partnership to build and/or operate I-69 as a toll road.

A vote won't come until later; amendments will be considered on Feb. 23. What's troubling about that step is that two influential Republican senators say they may pull the I-69 language out of the highway bill. We warned of this on Sunday, and since then, the Metropolitan Evansville Chamber of Commerce has issued an alert, stating that senators are under pressure from those opposed to public-private partnerships and those who oppose the construction of I-69.

If they succeed in pulling the language out of the bill, the Chamber said, any possibility of fast-tracking the construction of I-69 would be lost. What the senators, Robert Meeks, R-LaGrange, chairman of the committee, and Luke Kenley, R-Noblesville, say is that Daniels should first obtain an offer for I-69 construction and operation, then bring it back to the Legislature. At the least, that would mean the next session in 2007.

Those who support the delay say that it would be next year, regardless, before the state could process an offer. They also point out that the governor attained the \$3.85 billion bid on the privatization of the Indiana Toll Road before enabling legislation was passed. That is the legislation that passed the House and is now pending in the Senate.

But Daniels and backers of the legislation say he needs the measure passed this year so that the state can proceed with putting the I-69 package together. The governor has said he needs the legal authority first, in order for potential bidders to engage in serious talks.

We wonder, as well, what would happen should consideration of the I-69 legislation be put off for a year, only to have the balance of political power change in the Indiana House. That's unlikely in the Republican-controlled Senate, but in the House the Republicans hold only a narrow margin. In fact, the highway package passed there 52-47 on a straight party-line vote. Even the Democrats from Evansville voted against the bill that would allow I-69 to go forward. Were they to find themselves in the majority next year, what are the chances the Democrats would approve private-public legislation on I-69?

Daniels' Major Moves road initiative presents Indiana with a tremendous opportunity to complete many more highway and bridge projects than were ever thought possible. Opposition arguments about foreign-owned companies and about denying ownership of the toll road to our grandchildren are weak. And the Democrats' counterproposal to borrow money for highway work takes the state into debt while limiting the number of projects that the state could afford.

The Daniels administration has said that without the approval of this legislation, I-69 construction could not begin until at least 2017 and not be completed until 2035. With the legislation, construction could begin in 2008 and be finished 10 years later.

Why take the chance, when the opportunity is so close at hand? Those who would pull I-69 from the Major Moves legislation - as with those who would quash the entire highway initiative - are gambling with Indiana's future for no good reason.

The governor's highway package must pass the Senate this session with the I-69 provision intact.

If you want to contact your legislators on this or any other issue, you can call them toll-free in Indianapolis. Call your House representative at (800) 382-9842 or your senator at (800) 382-9467. You can find their e-mail addresses at www.in.gov/legislative/contact/index.html